

## The Hearts Inside the High-Rises: Social Exclusion and Character Representation in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*

The sound of breathless panting holds us curiously on the brink of Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*, evoking a visceral connection to the film's main character before we meet her and become immersed in her world. The opening shot then thrusts us in front of a teenager who is bent over, clearly spent, and catching her breath in the middle of a bare room with powder-blue walls stretching out behind her. This is our introduction to Mia, a 15-year-old who has just been acting out her dreams of becoming a dancer in an abandoned flat in the Essex housing estate where she lives. This apartment is a preciously secluded space for Mia, affording her rare moments of solitude and a chance to make hypnotically ritualized escapes into the world of hip hop; it temporarily offers her bluer skies than the reality outside. We glimpse this reality in the next shot as the camera hovers behind the protagonist, framing her shadowed figure against the window in what will become a visual motif throughout the film. The shot is striking as it establishes the character within the glass confines of her environment and aligns the audience with her gaze. Some deftly unobtrusive camerawork over Mia's shoulders then reveals signs of urban sprawl on the other side of the glass, and thus the protagonist of *Fish Tank* is situated in a socioeconomically disadvantaged environment that will become the backdrop for Andrea Arnold's intriguing exploration of social exclusion and human behavior.

For those who are familiar with the reputation of these projects (or “council estates,” as the British call them), the high-rise towers outside the apartment immediately evoke the claustrophobic centers of deprivation and moral decay that mushroomed around cities like London during the 1960s. During the same decade, and perhaps as a corollary to this phenomenon, the British film industry was revolutionized by the British New Wave, a

movement which broke away from the glamorized preoccupations of commercial mainstream cinema to focus instead on “regional locations and ordinary people,” thus laying the foundation for British social realism (Armstrong 92). With its stark depiction of an ostracized teenager's volatile relationship with her working-class environment, *Fish Tank* demonstrates clear influences of this social realist tradition. By assigning the perspective of the camera to a female adolescent, however, Arnold extends the bounds of representation beyond the “Angry Young Men” that characterized the social realist films of the 60s (Armstrong 93) and the thematic concern with disillusioned working-class masculinity that dominated the “kitchen sink” dramas of the 80s and 90s (“Good Intentions” 236; “British Social Realism” 108). Moreover, despite the consistent comparisons that critics have drawn between Arnold and filmmakers like Ken Loach and Mike Leigh (Fuller; Mullen; Romney), Arnold does not share the agenda-driven preoccupations of these directors in *Fish Tank*. Nevertheless, the film undeniably reflects a distinctive social realist aesthetic. This aesthetic, along with the complexity of Arnold's characters and the unusual directorial strategies she employs to create unpredictable situations, results in a refreshingly non-judgmental, illuminating, and convincing depiction of social exclusion as it is experienced by a female adolescent.

In the context of this paper, social exclusion will not simply refer to feeling alienated from a social group. Rather, the term has emerged as a multifaceted concept within academic discourse and British public policy in response to the UK government's awareness of concentrated areas of disadvantage around the country. The Social Exclusion Unit, a task force that was established by the British Labour Party in 1997 to address this issue, introduced social exclusion as a shorthand “for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown” (United Kingdom 2). A government-funded report published a decade later then went on to provide a working definition of the phrase that emphasized the complexity, multi-dimensionality, and process-oriented nature of social exclusion, highlighting an “inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society” (Levitas et al. 9).

In the process of defining this social problem, which has now become entangled in the political rhetoric of fixing a “Broken Britain,”<sup>1</sup> Levitas et al. also emphasized the “geographic concentration of problems” that has led to growing research on “concentrated exclusion” (14). A housing project, such as the Mardyke Estate where *Fish Tank* was filmed, is the preeminent example of concentrated exclusion that readily comes to mind in the popular British imagination (thanks to the sensationalized horror stories from “Sink” estates<sup>2</sup> that are generated by the tabloids<sup>3</sup>). The correlation between social exclusion and housing estates is not just imaginary, however, as numerous social policy studies have shown (Gosling; Macdonald et al.; Taylor; Webster et al.). Furthermore, within these concentrated locations, there are certain populations that, research suggests, suffer more acutely than others. Victoria K. Gosling, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Salford, states that women on these estates struggle with poverty for the longest period of time, while case studies indicate that “young people are being 'spaced out' by forces of social exclusion which are at their most intense on social housing estates” (Coles, England and Rugg 32). These insights into the concern over social exclusion in the British political and public consciousness, the correlation between social exclusion and housing estates, and the increased vulnerability of females and adolescents all provide a helpful context for Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*. And, conversely, a close analysis of the characters in *Fish Tank* sheds light on heavily maligned populations and social settings that researchers, journalists, and politicians have been trying to anatomize for years.

To begin, we may consider how the character of Mia exemplifies what Coles, England and Rugg refer to as the condition of being “spaced out.” As the opening sequence

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1 The phrase “Broken Britain” was popularized by British tabloid papers and the Conservative Party to encompass what was perceived to be the fracturing of the family unit, rising crime rates, languishing community spirit and general social decay in England. It is now frequently associated with the current Prime Minister, David Cameron, whose use of the leitmotif has prompted increasing interrogation of the phrase by journalists in recent years. See, for example, *The Guardian*'s pieces on “Is Britain Broken?” and “David Cameron's Solution,” as well as the article in *The Economist* entitled “How Broken is Britain?”

2 The description of housing projects as “Sink” estates is typically derogatory and reflects the belief (of some) that these areas are desolate, crime-ridden, and house the lowest dregs of society. An obvious parallel is found in the social realist texts labeled “kitchen sink” dramas due to their “drab representation” of desolate urban settings and under-represented social groups (“British Social Realism” 22).

3 See, for instance, Paula Gilligan's attack on the role that tabloids and reality television play in reinforcing stereotypes of council estate residents and hardening the views of the British public towards the poor and the marginalized.

of the film establishes, the camera primarily follows Mia when she is alone, suggesting a marginalization that is in keeping with research into social exclusion, which has indicated a shift from distributional to relational exclusion (Taylor 820). In other words, although signs of economic deprivation are evident from Mia's bleak surroundings, the character's material disadvantage is not the focus of *Fish Tank*. Rather, her paucity of social ("relational") ties receives the most attention. Mia's first words, for instance, are aggressive apologies to a friend on the phone as she bitterly tries to rebuild bridges of friendship that have been burned. Mia's scowling demeanor and bubbling anger are, therefore, immediately introduced in the context of social ostracism.

After leaving the phone message, Mia is on the move. The viewer accompanies her through a hand-held camera that travels alongside the character throughout the movie and which is reminiscent of the observational mode of documentary films that heavily influenced social realist texts. This stylistic choice not only gives the narrative a certain verisimilitude, but emphasizes a physical agitation that mirrors the character's emotional turmoil since Mia is frequently moving. We watch her dancing in her private space and walking from place to place alongside fences, gates, or borders that demarcate territories like the Margate Estate, the travellers' settlement, or Connor's workplace and wealthier neighborhood. Though her movements often seem fiercely purposeful, they also suggest instability. Mia's inability to stay put reinforces her position as a contained and marginalized figure who is restlessly exploring and transgressing boundaries; she is continually swimming into the glass walls of the tank in frustration.

On one of the first occasions that the camera does break away from its trailing of Mia, it cuts to several items in her bedroom: a school photo of her smiling in her uniform, a framed picture of her with an estranged friend, and a bear in a snow globe holding a plaque that says "Love You." These become poignant symbols for three important social spaces from which she has been excluded: school, her friendship group, and her family. Mia blatantly has no interest in reintegrating back into the school system since, later in the film, she runs away from an amiable-looking social worker who comes to discuss Mia's academic future at a pupil referral unit. The mission of the social worker closely reflects the

preoccupations of the Social Exclusion Unit. Indeed, the task force published reports on “Truancy and School Exclusion,” “New Opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in Education, Employment or Training,” and “Young Runaways” in an attempt to examine the troubling number of young people who have fallen through the net (United Kingdom 7-8).

Mia's friends are also a sore subject. After failing to get through to her friend on the phone at the beginning of the film, Mia storms over to a space where she finds her old friend dancing with other girls. There, she plants herself on a bench and watches them resentfully as a lone bellicose figure simmering on the sidelines. The camera frequently resumes its position behind her, encouraging audience identification with the character as the viewer is literally placed on her side. Suddenly, a snide remark from one of the girls causes Mia to lash out and head-butt the teenager before raging off again. This violent eruption, together with the foul-mouthed insults she previously hurled at her friend's father and, of course, her donning of the dreaded “hoody,” conjures the all-too common stereotype of the belligerent, shiftless youth that is sustained by the British media. As one article has highlighted, “the constant vilification, denigration, and humiliation of poor British youth . . . are odd features of the UK press” (Gilligan 245). Various interviews with older inhabitants of housing estates have also shown that young people are largely perceived to be “a social nuisance” (Coles, England and Rugg 26), and that they have “often felt like living up to this adult perception” of them (25). It is tempting, then, for a middle-class audience to write Mia off as a social problem.

What makes *Fish Tank* so compelling and convincing, however, is its ability to elicit deeper, ambivalent audience responses to a complicated central character living in a complex socioeconomic setting. Having grown up on an estate like Mardyke, Andrea Arnold is clearly more inclined to be defensive of her adolescent lead and of the general community culture in this setting. Her unusual decision to cast non-actor, Katie Jarvis, a 16 year-old from Essex who was initially spotted yelling at her boyfriend at a train station, illustrates her preoccupation with creating an authentic representation of this frequently demonized age group. While Jarvis's raw fury and disaffection appears to be captivatingly (and frighteningly) real in the confrontation with the dancing girls, her capacity for tenderness (as demonstrated

by her affectionate interaction with the travellers' horse in the subsequent scene) evokes our sympathies. Her attempts to free the horse and her earnest dance rehearsals also help to present Mia as more than just a delinquent “hoodie” and an unfortunate product of her harsh, working-class environment. In fact, Arnold is very careful not to portray her protagonist as a mere victim of circumstances. Mia's fierce will and spirit mean that the audience cannot comfortably pin all of her (sometimes distressing) actions on other people or outside forces. The character is easily provoked and impulsive, and although we almost exclusively track her point of view, she is frequently hard to read.

As a character that does possess a great deal of independent agency, Mia's exclusion is, to some extent, self-imposed. And this is not necessarily a bad thing. Mia's costume, for example, deliberately sets her apart from her scantily-clad friends who self-consciously parade their sexuality for a bunch of leering boys. Her friends have clearly bought into what one expert in adolescent development refers to as the “identity scripts” that the media sells to youth “based on stereotypical gendered and sexualized images” (Herr 48). Mia, by contrast, is always wearing darker, subdued colors, and is fully covered in her baggy hoody and tracksuit bottoms. The “angry, muscular intensity” of her dancing is also juxtaposed with the girls' more provocative, sensual moves (Romney). As Pam Hirsch asserts in her analysis of the role of the body in *Fish Tank*, Mia's aggression “emblemizes [her] violent refusal of the approved norm of adolescent female self-presentation” (474). This distinction becomes all the more pronounced when we recall our introduction to her precocious sister, Tyler, who is sunbathing in a bikini top, and to her mother, Joanne, who flaunts her sexuality in tight, revealing shirts, and miniskirts. Mia's resistance to these gender norms, on the other hand, demonstrates a deliberate and admirable self-exclusion from the objectified female identity that the women around her have adopted. Her refusal to conform is also evident during her highly-anticipated audition at the end of the film. When Mia is subjected to the gaze of the nightclub owners, who are looking for a titillating performer and ask her if she has any “hot pants,” she walks out of the audition. Although this is a painfully disappointing experience for the character (her reflection is fractured in a wall of paneled mirrors outside of the audition room, perhaps representing her emotional upheaval as her dreams fall apart),

Mia's bravely defiant rejection of sexualized female stereotypes speaks to her power as an independent spirit.

The audition scene also emphasizes that Mia is uncomfortable being watched, in contrast to virtually all of the female figures in her life who enjoy being gazed at. It has already been noted that Arnold's protagonist is restlessly moving. When she is not moving, though, Mia is typically the one watching others. On one level, this serves to reveal the lively dynamics of the housing estate to the audience and to underscore Mia's natural teenage curiosity. Eyeline matches capture Mia's interest in the effervescent energy that erupts out of doorways, on stairwells, and in open spaces within this community. The surging life force of the estate is also conveyed through the lively, diegetic soundtrack which features children screaming excitedly, reggae music blaring through walls, and neighbors talking animatedly. Watching is also an activity that feeds Mia's ambitions, though, as she eagerly studies YouTube videos of break dancing at an internet cafe and keeps her eyes glued to a street dancer as he practices flipping against a wall.

Furthermore, being the gazer, as opposed to the “gazed-at” crucially entails a deliberate distance from others that can be empowering. In Laura Mulvey's essay, entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey famously advanced the theory that mainstream cinema is dominated by a “male gaze” which objectifies the female “other,” reflecting the sexual imbalance that exists in our patriarchal society. Her dissection of the “male gaze” revealed the power that is associated with being the one who watches “in an active controlling sense” (17). This power comes from the separation, or social exclusion, of the voyeur who, in the context of film, determines how and what the audience sees. In *Fish Tank*, Andrea Arnold reverses the traditional gender of the gaze by orienting the narrative from the perspective of a teenage girl. Part of Mia's intimidating manner, then, stems from her dominant position of watching others. As Mia leans over the balcony or looks out of the window, her powerful, elevated vantage point is conveyed in the high-angle shots that capture life on the estate below. Similarly, her gaze unnerves the dancing girls who dislike the intensity of her stares. Interestingly, Mia's distance from the other character also gives her a

certain advantage as she observes the boys watching the girls. By separating herself from this male gaze, she appears to be free of it.

On the other hand, Mia's absorbed viewing of the cam recorder footage of her mother's shirtless boyfriend, Connor, and her voyeuristic spying on Joanne and Connor as they have sex undermine the notion of an empowering gaze. Instead, these scenes reinforce the lonely confusion of a neglected young person who is trapped on the outside and whose knowledge of emotional and physical intimacy between men and women has to be pieced together through secretive, snatched observations. Mia has had no first-hand experience of a healthy dynamic between the sexes because she has had no stable father figure in her life. And her mother has clearly not been concerned with exposing her to positive male role models. Therefore, Mia's excluded gaze suggests abandonment and lack of participation in meaningful social interactions as much as it suggests the power to threaten other characters and to unfold sights and insights to the audience.

In addition, despite not inviting the male gaze, Mia is not completely free from being an object of it herself. The male travelers clearly objectify her as a plaything when they harass her. Also, her first encounter with Connor is uncomfortable since she is unguarded and dancing in her pajamas while he quietly watches her. "Don't mind me, girl. Carry on. I was enjoying it," Connor says, with a charming and overfamiliar smile as she shrinks under his gaze from embarrassment. Their introduction establishes an uneasy level of intimacy and tension that reaches its climax after Connor becomes aroused by watching Mia while she dances to his favorite song. Despite sharing the "gaze" of the camera throughout the film, Mia's gender and youth leave her vulnerable to sexual advances when Connor abuses her trust. Ultimately, though, her vulnerability is compounded by the exclusion that she chronically experiences within her own family.

Our sympathies for Mia increase vastly when we witness her toxic home environment and understand why she seeks refuge on the streets and in the abandoned flat. Upon entering her house, Mia is immediately upbraided by her mother who violently pushes and slaps her, calling her a "cunt." This is Joanne (played by Kierston Wareing), a single mother who is ostensibly a tarty, self-absorbed and uncaring mother. After hurling back equally



vitriolic insults, Mia retreats to her bedroom—the one which displays the now pathetic-looking snow globe that says “Love You.” At first, and from Mia's perspective, Joanne's callosity and selfishness seem monstrous. Joanne seems to be a key force behind Mia's exclusion from the family home, especially when she becomes completely engrossed in Connor. Connor sweeps Joanne off of her feet and she has no interest in sharing him with her children, as evidenced by her shunning of Mia from the party, her attempts to push Mia away when Connor invites the girls to go with them for a drive, and her complete obliviousness to Mia once they are in the car, heading off on their excursion. Joanne's vicious comments also undermine her daughter's self-belief at every turn, such as when she tells Connor not to lend Mia his video camera (“She'll break it”) and when she appears eager to send Mia off to a new school where she “can fuck as many boys as [she] likes.”

On the surface, Joanne embodies the image of the “benefit single mother of the tabloid imaginary” that, Gilligan claims, is sold to the public by the male elite in order to promote beliefs in the undeserving female poor (246). Similarly, Victoria K. Gosling points out that “the supposed decline/lack of social capital within poor communities is often attributed to women,” thereby building their negative reputation. If housing projects have become the ultimate material symbols of social decay in England, then single mothers have been blamed as the main cause of the moral degeneration in the communities that reside in these settings. Women, and particularly single mothers, have become a target of public policy and government intervention, such as when the Social Exclusion Unit pledged to tackle teenage pregnancy after noting that Britain had the highest rate of teenage births in Europe at the turn of the millennium (United Kingdom 8).

In the case of *Fish Tank*, as with her ambivalent portrayal of the council estate setting and her complex depiction of female adolescence, Andrea Arnold neither sets out to indict nor vindicate single mothers. It is important to remember that Joanne's presentation is largely filtered through Mia's eyes. Upon closer analysis, Mia's harsh perception of her mother is complicated by subtle signs that belie Joanne's apparently cold-hearted nature. Kierston Wareing explains, for instance, how Arnold directed her to deliver certain harsh lines quietly and softly when the actress's instinct was to spit them out (Interview). She cites

Joanne's comment about abortion to Mia as an example. "Did I tell you I nearly had you aborted? I even made an appointment," Joanne mumbles to her daughter so faintly that the comment is easy to miss. Undoubtedly, this is a shocking statement to make to one's child and there is no justification for it, but it is particularly intriguing that Arnold deliberately had Wareing deliver the line in muted tones. At this point in the film, Joanne has had her heart broken by Connor and we realize, as Wareing did, that this character most likely has her own extremely painful history of abandonment and social exclusion. In another scene, Mia is in the kitchen, pretending to get a drink for the social worker, and, if we strain our ears, we hear Joanne telling the social worker that "When [Mia] was born she didn't stop crying for days. It's like she came out looking for trouble." The two women then share an exchange which reveals how hard it is for Joanne to be alone. These whispered comments almost go unnoticed because the audience is focused on Mia, who is planning the right moment to escape from the social worker and is hardly paying attention to her mother's woes. The reality is that Joanne must have been very young when she had Mia; she no doubt faced her own ostracism as a pregnant teenager who was left with a crying child.

In this light, the beach scene on the living room wall and the girly pink colors and butterfly motif in Joanne's bedroom are touching evocations of the young girl who had to grow up all too soon and who still harbors her own romantic fantasies. Our sympathy for Mia's mother is also heightened by Arnold's use of slow motion to intensify the scene where Joanne is taking down Connor's white shirts while talking to a friend on the phone. The sound of the breeze, wind-chimes and birds chirping, the fluttering of the pristine shirts, Joanne's beaming smile, and her elated comments about Connor ("He's so easygoing...when I saw him I just knew!") all create a dreamy and peaceful atmosphere as we glimpse a rare moment of true happiness for Joanne. But this happiness disappears all too soon. Although the narrative focuses on Mia's betrayal by Connor, we must not forget that Joanne is betrayed too. And so, Joanne is left to cradle herself in her room, with its girly teenage décor, crying over yet another man who has left her and excluded her from her dreams of happiness.

So, can we blame the neglectful men whose absence is so acutely felt throughout *Fish Tank* for the social exclusion of these generations of women? For Arnold, and for Michael Fassbender (the actor playing Connor), it is not as simple as that. In an interview with the actor, one audience member expressed their opinion that Fassbender's character was a monster, something which Fassbender emphatically disagreed with, explaining his interpretation of Connor as an easy, loose, but irresponsible individual (Schwartz). Had this been a typical Hollywood film, or an agenda-driven text that sought to attack the patriarchal system, Connor's character could easily have been turned into a stock villain. Arnold's unusual method of withholding the script from the cast members and filming the feature in chronological order, however, was an ingenious way to replicate the unpredictability of real-life situations. Just as Wareing was unaware that Connor had another family until she watched the movie at the Cannes Film Festival, prompting genuine confusion as to why the character would have left Joanne (Interview), Fassbender's lack of foreknowledge allows him to embody the truth of the moment for his character and to portray him in a likeable manner, so that when Connor gives in to his sexual urges, both the actor and the audience are shocked. This unpredictability also mitigates the viewer's judgment as it is implied that the characters are not simply "good" or "bad," but have the *capacity* to do both positive and harmful things. The audience surely condemns Connor's actions but it is harder to completely condemn the character since his actions do not seem calculated or intentional.

Notably, Connor does exert a positive influence on Mia's family to begin with. He instills a sense of ambition and self-worth in Mia and embodies all the ideals of someone who is socially included: he has a car,<sup>4</sup> a job, is generous with his time and money, and provides the family with an escape into the country. Indeed, the family excursion to the river enacts a common trope in social realist films where the protagonists find respite at the seaside or countryside ("British Social Realism" 110). The mixed interactions that Connor has with Mia and her family, along with the convincing acting that is elicited through Arnold's clever decision to withhold crucial information from the cast, prevents us from

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4 Lack of transport is a major problem in British housing estates, as evidenced by the fact that Mia walks everywhere, and as supported by research conducted by the Social Exclusion Unit in its 2003 report entitled "Transport and Social Exclusion – Making the Connections" (United Kingdom 5).

pinning Mia and Joanne's problems on the only significant male figure in the film. Connor, like the other characters, is filmed non-judgmentally, and so the audience is left to sort out their ambivalent responses to him.

Similarly, our sympathies with Mia also vacillate when she violates Connor's boundaries in response to him violating hers. She breaks into his house and roams around as though it is her own, urinates on his floor, and kidnaps and endangers his daughter. The unpredictability of her actions highlights the complexity of her character and shocks us into realizing that although we have followed her for a good two hours, we are no closer to figuring her out. These noncritical and ambiguous portrayals of characters allow the audience to reflect on the complicated nature of human behavior and, as Arnold herself maintains, to explore whether it is possible to have empathy with individuals who make surprising reactive choices in difficult situations (qtd. in Mullen).

*Fish Tank* is a vivid dramatization of social exclusion from the perspective of a female adolescent and the audience is, of course, eager to learn whether escape and inclusion into a healthier community is possible for Mia. As in real life, where people's choices lead to unexpected consequences and every new beginning is merely a pause in the story, Andrea Arnold chooses to leave this question open to interpretation. Mia's eventual departure from the estate with Billy, a traveler who is heading to Wales, seems hopeful because she physically leaves her "tank" in her determination to not just "get by" in life, but to "get on."<sup>5</sup> "Say hello to the world for me!" cries Tyler as the car drives away, and maybe Mia *is* the only one from that family and that estate who has the chance to embrace the wider world. This is not to suggest, however, that *Fish Tank* follows the "triumph-over-adversity" narrative of other social realist texts like *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* (Armstrong 99). Refreshingly, the film does not offer "blind optimism in the face of sociopolitical complexity," as Richard Armstrong argues that these other feel-good "Britflicks" do (99). Andrea Arnold introduces enough narrative elements to unsettle a rose-tinted viewing of the ending of *Fish Tank*. Mia has, we remember, had unprotected sex with Connor. She has also curiously mirrored her

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5 The distinction between "getting by" and "getting on" is grounded in academic discourse, with sociological studies drawing on this difference to explain the functions and limitations of the social capital that exists on housing estates. See, for example, Kearns and Parkinson 2105, Gosling, and MacDonald 884.

mother in the family's touching farewell dance to Nas's "Life's a Bitch and Then You Die," alluding to a possible reproduction of the trajectory of teenage pregnancy, single motherhood and socioeconomic disadvantage that has entrapped her mother in a state of social exclusion. Consequently, the final image of the silver balloon drifting out of the estate is an equivocal symbol of a solitary heart (Mia's) drifting out into the world; it indicates both the promise of freedom, and the unnerving image of a young person floating alone into the unknown with no healthy familial ties keeping her grounded.

The solution to Mia's social exclusion is never resolved in *Fish Tank*. Rather, the viewer is left with the abiding image of a heart and a high-rise building, emblemizing the social realist preoccupation with humanistic representations of marginalized individuals in relation to their environment. Despite this, *Fish Tank* is not just another film with a "socio-political agenda," as one theorist claims it is (Hirsch 482). As this study has shown, a familiarity with social exclusion as a multi-dimensional concept in academic and political discourse, and an understanding of the negative stereotypes that abound for groups like female adolescents and single mothers in the wider British consciousness are helpful to contextualize *Fish Tank*. Arnold's feature is not, however, primarily reactionary or politically charged because she is more interested in truthfully portraying her characters than in formulating judgments about their choices or their environment. In writing about people and places that she knows, and by making unusual decisions like hiring a non-professional actor, following a single, consistent (but limited) perspective, and withholding scripts from the actors, Arnold ensures that her film is animated with an immediacy, unpredictability and striking authenticity that keeps the focus on the complexity of human behavior. Ultimately, Arnold's ambiguous screenplay and the compellingly naturalistic acting by the three leads invite viewers to analyze prejudices they may have against certain groups and locations. The audience is also prompted to reflect on issues of social exclusion more deeply after observing the capacity of these characters to act as both constructive and destructive forces within their environment.

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